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# Revisiting The Ghosts of Vatican II: Gender in Catholic Horror Cinema of the American 60s and 70s

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Revisiting The Ghosts of Vatican II:  
Gender in Catholic Horror Cinema of the American 60s and 70s

Currie Dixon McKinley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.  
The University of Mississippi

Oxford MS  
Spring 2015

Approved

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## **DEDICATION**

For Harry, E. Buzz, Abby, Sadie, Bugsy, and all the other movies dogs who were far smarter than their owners.

**ABSTRACT**  
**CURRIE MCKINLEY:**  
Revisiting The Ghosts of Vatican II:  
Gender in Catholic Horror Cinema of the American 60s and 70s  
(Under the direction of Dr. Mary F. Thurlkill)

This thesis contextualizes 1960s and 1970s American horror films against the historical backdrop of Vatican II with the intent of discovering how the texts, reception, and legacies of the films could illuminate the gender politics of the various changes implemented over the course of Vatican II. The first chapter analyzes the text of *Rosemary's Baby* as a metaphor for restrictive policies on birth control on the part of the post-Vatican II papacy. The second chapter considers the implications of disagreements between the author and director of *The Exorcist* with regard to how different individuals wanted the Catholic Church to present itself in Vietnam-era America. The third and final chapter analyzes the legacy of *The Amityville Horror* as the end of the Catholic horror renaissance and the beginning of the more female-friendly paranormal horror genre.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

Why this project?	1
Why these films?	4

### CHAPTER I

Roe's Mary: <i>Rosemary's Baby</i> and "Satanic" Catholic Conservatism	7
------------------------------------------------------------------------	---

### CHAPTER II

A Failed Exorcism: <i>The Exorcist</i> and Lingering Ghosts of Catholic Conservatism	26
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

### CHAPTER III

The End of an Era and The Beginning of a New Age: The Legacy of <i>The Amityville Horror</i>	49
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

CONCLUSION	63
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BIBLIOGRAPHY	64
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## INTRODUCTION

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### Why this project?

This project began, as many do, with an observation rather than a question. A burgeoning horror junkie, I had spent the past few months rewatching some of my personal favorite scary movies in the company of friends and family whose arms I had twisted into sharing my terror – *Paranormal Activity 1* and *3* and *The Conjuring* were in heavy circulation. This fascination came to the dismay of my friends and parents, who respectively found the movies laughably unscary and repellently distasteful. However, I insisted on watching them over and over with them, partially because without my presence they would wheedle their way out of watching, but more so because I continually grappled with the implications of the gendered tropes I saw on screen. Three separate films with nine total daughters between them and no sons to speak of, three women who became possessed and no men. Most specifically, I gravitated towards *The Conjuring* and its implementation of religion. Whereas the women possessed in the *Paranormal* films exhibited very little agency throughout the process of becoming possessed, the mother in *The Conjuring*, with the help of another woman—a woman of

God—was able to overcome her possession through the power of divine motherly love. Their respective husbands were both sidelined for the film's climax, despite the men's clear position as heads of household iterated in the film. At this point, a question began to form – did more religiously inflected horror films have a tradition of affording female characters a heightened level of agency within the framework of Christianity? To what end I asked this question, I was uncertain, but that initial spark of curiosity led me back to American cinema's horror renaissance – the Catholic possession films of the 1960s and 70s.

To my dismay, my suspicions of female empowerment in horror films influenced by Christianity were far from confirmed. In *Rosemary's Baby* I saw an otherwise strong woman coerced into bearing the Anti-Christ and finally deciding to be that child's mother. In *The Exorcist* I saw a young girl become possessed, her body used continually as a plot device to measure the spiritual strength of her male saviors while her mother stood by in terror. In *The Omen*, I saw a maid hang herself, a mother be thrown from a hospital window, and the only competent female character, the Antichrist's satanic au pair, be stabbed to death by Gregory Peck. Finally, and almost most upsettingly, in *The Amityville Horror*, I watched as directors paraded the Christian mother figure around in fetishizing pigtails, preppy schoolgirl outfits, and satin soft-core lingerie as she watched her husband slowly become unhinged before his sudden recovery in the film's final act, in which he returns to patriarchal grace through the heroic act of not killing his wife and children. How could *The Conjuring*, a film whose marketing and critical acclaim hinged heavily on its roots in the 70s tradition of Catholic horror cinema, have crafted such a positive representation of Christian female agency from an era of filmmaking with such



regressive portrayals of women? My research led me inevitably to the scholar Carol Clover and various other feminist critics of horror, but despite all my searching, I could find very little scholarship on these 60s and 70s texts that contextualized them against the specific historical-religious backdrop of their moment – against Vatican II, the defining event of Catholicism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from which fascination with these religiously inflected horror classics sprung.

The further I looked into the specifics of Vatican II—the changes it made to the Catholic Church, the gendered aspects of the proceedings which were all but inevitable given the event’s proximity to the women’s movement, the complete overhaul of how the Church claimed it wanted to be perceived in the modern world—the more the themes of these 60s and 70s horror films crystallized in my head. I began to see some of the films as operating subversively, critiquing the Church’s shortcomings in living up to the promises of Vatican II. Some began to appear more celebratory of the Church, advocating for its continued progress towards a more modernized, more approachable brand of faith. All the films, however, have a singular confusion with incorporating gender into their commentaries on Catholicism and its growing pains in the years immediately following Vatican II – are women a concern? Does a new model of Catholicism necessitate a new brand of Christian masculinity? Do women still fit comfortably in a Holy Mother archetype in an increasingly progressive era, and does their existence outside that archetype make them powerful? Threatening? Disposable? All these questions culminated into the final research intervention from which this project stems – How did the texts of these films and their interactions with American audiences reveal public perceptions of post-Vatican II Catholicism’s trajectory with regard to gender? The

question bears scrutiny in this moment not only because of the upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II (as fate would have it, my birthday this coming December 9<sup>th</sup> will mark fifty years to the day of human existence in a post-Vatican II world), but because of films like *The Conjuring* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* that show religion is having a resurgence in mainstream, fiscally successful horror film. As we look forward to religiously inflected horror film of the future and its capacity for positive and provocative gender representation, we would do well to look towards the past to see what contemporary films have to draw upon, and what has changed with regard to intersections of religion and gender between then and now.

#### Why these films?

The question of cherry picking is nearly irrelevant to scholarship on post-Vatican II American horror cinema, as there are really only four contenders if one wants to explore the films that, by the numbers, were most widely seen and had the largest impact on their cultural moments. The films this paper will interrogate proceed in chronological order - *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Amityville Horror* (1979). Before delving into how each of these movies will be implemented in this project, I feel the need to account for why *The Omen* (1976), a traditional companion to *Rosemary* and *Exorcist* given that the three are often informally referred to as the demonic child trilogy, does not appear prominently in the following chapters. While *The Omen* clearly has an enduring cultural presence (a nearly shot for shot remake was released in 2006) and employs horror conventions that compliment both *Rosemary* and *Exorcist*, its total domestic gross of sixty million was vastly outpaced by *Amityville*, which pulled in

eighty-six million despite being by most other conceivable measures a worse film.

Because *Amityville* arrived just on the cusp of the 80s and concerns itself so specifically with the legacy of Vatican II, it seemed an altogether better choice for this project than *The Omen*, especially given of how important the films' interactions with their audiences in terms of sheer viewer volume are to some of my central arguments (IMDB).

The first chapter on *Rosemary Baby* is less concerned with reception and audience interaction than it is with the text of the film itself. *Rosemary*'s most salient offerings with regard to gender in post-Vatican II America come in the form of the metaphoric potential of the text – the symbolic criticisms that its characters make of instances in which the Catholic Church back-paddled on its promises of progressivism after Vatican II with regard to Catholic women and their right to bodily autonomy.

The second chapter deals with *The Exorcist*, a film which I use not so much for the text itself as for the ways in which issues over the production and reception of the text revealed a divide in how different people wanted the Church to represent itself in Vietnam-era America. While some celebrated the promises of progressivism made during Vatican II and wanted to see Church patriarchs carry out those promises by modeling a gentler, less traditionally conservative brand of masculinity, many others seemed content to leave the promises of Vatican II by the wayside in favor of a more traditional, archaic form of religiosity and Christian manhood.

The third and final chapter on *The Amityville Horror* is about the legacy the movie left behind. In many ways, *Amityville* marks a transition from America's fascination with Catholicism to its foray into more pseudo-scientific styles of supernatural horror. The manner in which *Amityville* makes this transition sets up a

number of gendered tropes that speak both to how Americans perceived women's roles as being limited with regard to religious cinema, and augmented with regard to the New-Age genre of horror cinema that took off immediately following the wild success of *Amityville*.

Through an assessment of these films—their central metaphors, interactions with their audiences, and contemporary legacy given our fifty-year vantage point from which to view them—this project will argue that although progressive changes made during Vatican II certainly impacted the inner workings of The Church in ways that still exist today, those changes did not carry over into how Catholicism regarded traditional American gender constructs – a fact which ultimately limited the Church's influence in contemporary cultural spheres as public interest waned on an institution that did not seem to be progressing in the ways that Vatican II had promised.

## CHAPTER I

### Roe's Mary: *Rosemary's Baby* and "Satanic" Catholic Conservatism

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On the morning of July 25<sup>th</sup> 1968, the Vatican released an encyclical letter to the Catholic world reaffirming orthodox teachings on conjugal love, birth control, and parenthood. Entitled *Humanae Vitae*, Latin for "Of Human Life," the letter respectively stated that "marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the procreation and education of children," that "the direct interruption of the generative process [...] and, above all, all direct abortion [...] are to be excluded as lawful means of regulating [a family's] number of children," and that responsible parents "are not free to act as they choose" but "are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator" (4-5). These declarations, spearheaded by Pope Paul VI, caused immediate controversy in Catholic communities, with the August 7<sup>th</sup> *National Catholic Reporter* bearing the headline: "Paul Issues Contraceptive Ban: Debate Flares on His Authority" (McCormick). Though the Church had steadfastly maintained the positions

explicated in *Humanae* since the 1930 encyclical letter *Casti Connubii*, the letter came as a shock to Catholic leaders and practitioners alike because of recent declarations made by a group known as the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control (Kissling). Created in 1963 after the Second Vatican Council's failure to reach a decision on the morality of modern forms of birth control, the commission was an assemblage of Papal appointed scientists, theologians, married couples, physicians, bishops, and cardinals all charged with the task of determining whether the Catholic Church ought to modify its teachings on family planning (Fehring 121). In 1966 the commission released a majority report urging the Catholic Church to allow contraception, stating that "as long as a couple is generally open to having children, each and every marital act does not have to have a procreative intent" (Fehring 124). Met with joy by much of the Catholic community—many of whom "began using the Pill at once" (Kissling)—the report seemed to indicate that a Papal renunciation of the contraception prohibition was imminent. Little did they know that July 25<sup>th</sup> 1968 would herald a distressingly familiar future for the Catholic Church.

Flashback forty-three days – It is June 12<sup>th</sup> and Roman Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby* (based on Ira Levin's 1967 novel of the same name) is opening in theatres nationwide. The psychological horror film about a married woman unwittingly offered by her husband as human vessel for the Antichrist will go on to be a massive commercial success, grossing over thirty-three million on a meager 3.2 million dollar budget (*IMDb*). Immensely popular not only in its day, *Rosemary* has become something of a critical darling with several academics chiming in on its implications for the horror genre and, more specifically, for feminist cinema studies. Karyn Valerius writes in her provocative essay "*Rosemary's Baby*, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects" that

*Rosemary* “invites feminist speculation,” as it is “a story of violence, deceit, and misappropriation of a woman’s body by the people she trusts” (116). With readings ranging from Barbara Creed’s assessment of *Rosemary*’s Satanic pregnancy as an anti-feminist play on misogynistic fears of the female body (Creed 11), to Valerius’s reading of *Rosemary*’s plight as a feminist metaphor for the struggles faced by women seeking abortions in an era of highly restrictive abortive care (116), there are several scholars who contextualize *Rosemary* in relation to the U.S. women’s movement. However, despite the film’s decidedly Catholic trappings and temporal proximity to Vatican II, there are very few feminist readings of the film that apply a Catholic historical lens – a gap in scholarship I find odd because of how relevant Catholic debates on conjugal love, birth control, and parenthood were to the women’s movement of the late 1960s.

This essay will read *Rosemary’s Baby* in relation to Catholic debates on proper conjugal practice following both Vatican II and The Pontifical Commission on Birth Control and preceding the release of *Humanae Vitae*. By contextualizing *Rosemary* against a backdrop of radical upheaval in the Catholic Church, audiences can discern a reading of the film in which both its feminist and religious themes crystalize into a rich, unified theme advocating a more progressive Catholic stance on issues relating to birth and pregnancy. Keeping company with a long tradition of literature and film that avoid critiquing the Church directly, *Rosemary’s Baby* presents its criticisms by way of a metaphor that is both as subtle as it is bombastic. I will argue that the film critiques the Church’s traditional teachings on conjugal love, birth control, and parenthood from a post-Vatican II Catholic perspective – a feat achieved by satirically recasting the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church as a Satanist cult. By conflating Catholicism with the

very evil it professes to contest, *Rosemary's Baby* indicts what many progressive Catholics of the era thought of as hypocritical and ultimately evil church policies.

*"You're not religious my dear, are you?"*

Before addressing how the film critiques the Catholic Church's position on issues related to conjugal duty, it is important to understand how the film allegorizes the central characters—Roman, Minnie, Rosemary, and Guy. I will first endeavor to demonstrate how the filmmakers establish Rosemary's Satanist neighbors as parodic symbols of the Church. The audience can easily read the Satanists in question—Roman and Minnie Castevet—as the wicked opposites of “good” Papal authority. The Pope is head of the Catholic Church, Roman is head of the Satanist Church; Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Roman and Minnie hold a celebration for the birth of the Antichrist “exactly half the year round from Christmas” on the *sixth* month of 1966 – the parallelism is not subtle (Levin). Throughout the film however, the Castevets are consistently conflated with the Catholic Church in a way that extends beyond mere oppositional parallelism. A slumbering Rosemary overhears Roman and Minnie arguing over their failed attempts to procure a mother for Satan's child, and in her dream state she embodies their voices within a Catholic nun and a priest. Further elision of Satanism and Catholicism occurs the night that Rosemary is drugged and ritually impregnated by the Devil. Knocked nearly unconscious by Minnie's spiked chocolate mousse, a dangerously high Rosemary feverishly imagines the Satanists surrounding her to be fellow Catholics attending a yacht party – “Catholics only,” a man tells her as she attempts to invite a Protestant friend aboard. As she regains some degree of lucidity, Rosemary alarmedly



notices the actual, flesh and blood Satanists surrounding before her imagination conjures up the image of Pope Paul VI to bear witness to the whole affair. Embarrassed to be caught in the act of fornication, Rosemary asks the Pope's forgiveness – a forgiveness he grants before extending his ring for her to kiss. However, the ring is ornamented not by a jewel or Papal seal, but by what the audience recognizes as a charm given to Rosemary earlier in the film. The charm—a silver ball containing a substance referred to as tannis root—will eventually be revealed as an important relic in the practice of satanic witchcraft.

These visual conflations are preliminary indicators that the Satanist cult and Catholic Church are not intended to be opposites – rather, the two are satirically compared. The connection is further underscored through how Minnie, Roman, and the other coven members are characterized. Unilaterally elderly, invasive, and materialistic, the Satanists embody certain negative qualities and perceptions of the Catholic Church that Vatican II by in large sought to amend. Vatican II signified a major effort on the part of progressive Church officials to make deep structural changes to its policies: engaging with modern debates as opposed to dodging them, having priests face towards the congregation rather than away from them, and abandoning the superficial formality of conducting mass in Latin rather than the common tongue (Pope). Tellingly, the Satanists in *Rosemary's Baby* exclusively exhibit the characteristics of the pre-Vatican II Church. The constant presence of elderly people in her home makes Rosemary crave company of her young friends, a dilemma reminiscent of the pre-Vatican II Church's refusal to engage with modern issues relevant to young practitioners. Rosemary's perception of the Casteverts as “nosy” coupled with her assertion that they are “too friendly and helpful”

reveals her skepticism about their authenticity – a skepticism many practitioners experienced while attending services in which priests offered salvation to congregations they would not deign to face. The Castevet's conspicuous wealth and Minnie's habit of asking Rosemary the price of her belongings reflects a pre-Vatican II Catholic preoccupation with material, presentational aspects of ceremony that by 1962 had proven as alienating to lay people as the Castevet's behavior is to Rosemary. The film's consistent attribution of pre-Vatican II qualities to Roman Castevet's—Roman *Catholics*—coven establishes the film's condemnatory stance on conservative Catholic politics and informs the audience of the film's post-Vatican II ethos.

While Roman and Minnie fulfill their role as satanic parody of the Roman Catholic Church, Rosemary and Guy respectively represent a contemporary generation of lapsed Catholics and historical Protestant critiques of the Catholicism. Rosemary establishes her relationship to Catholicism very explicitly during her first dinner with the Castevets – “I was raised a Catholic, but now I don't know what I believe.” The aforementioned scene in which a dreaming Rosemary gives Minnie's scolding voice embodiment in the form of a nun offers an explanation as to why Rosemary has drifted from her Catholic upbringing. Her dreamscape—an elision of real time sensory input and impressionistic memory—features two nuns, the older of the two in the foreground articulating Minnie's words and the younger in the background standing in front of several young school girls who, by the positioning of their arms, the audience understands to be part of a choir. The elder nun points angrily toward the younger, at which point a semi-lucid Rosemary murmurs “I told sister Veronica about the windows and she withdrew the school from the competition.” Rosemary's subconscious

association of harsh, critical tones with a Catholic nun from her past reveals to the audience that memories of her Catholic upbringing are characterized by guilt and fear. Although the younger nun—positioned in solidarity with the young girls—would suggest that not all of Rosemary’s memories of Catholic authority figures are negative, her assertion that “now I don’t know what I believe” gives the impression that memories of older, more traditionally minded Church figures ultimately caused her to distance herself from the Church. Establishing Rosemary as a lapsed Catholic allows the filmmakers to frame her treatment at the hands of the Castevelts as a critique of the ways in which Church officials use conservatism in a way that simultaneously repels and maintains control over practitioners.

While the Castevet’s exploitation of Rosemary is meant to symbolize the harmful ways in which pre-Vatican II conservatism asserts power over modern Catholics, Guy’s betrayal of Rosemary plays on far less recent corruptions within the Catholic Church. On three occasions the film references the two plays in which Guy—a struggling New York actor—has recently appeared. The first, “No One Loves an Albatross,” is immediately appealing to the critical reader, as Guy is nothing if not a cursed figure whose betrayal will result in his wife’s profound undoing, but the more historically salient of the two is simply entitled “Luther.” In a film so steeped with Catholic themes, the name “Luther” begs an association with Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation whose *Ninety-Five Theses* famously decried the Catholic practice of granting spiritual indulgences in exchange for alms. By foregrounding our understanding of Guy’s role in Rosemary’s plight in the context of the Catholic debate on indulgences, the film prompts us to read Guy’s decision to hand Rosemary over to the Satanists as a metaphoric

exchange of alms – not for salvation but for earthly success. Because the path of “Luther” did not pan out as Guy had hoped, he opts to offer his wife’s body as tribute in exchange for the promise of a flourishing acting career. Understanding Guy’s betrayal of Rosemary in terms of the Catholic indulgence practice is crucial, as it establishes her as an object in the eyes of her husband and, more importantly, in the eyes of the Castevets. In showing how Rosemary is more useful to the Castevets as a womb than as a woman, the film posits that pre-Vatican II policies on marital love, birth control, and parenthood are not so much moral convictions as they are tools for the promulgation of Catholic power through the objectification of female bodies.

Once we as an audience understand how the symbolic roles of each character figure into the film’s complex critique of Catholic power, we can finally unlock the more specific Church policies the film advocates against. By further dissecting the narrative in the light of Catholic symbolism, the film’s specific theses come into focus: that Catholic teachings on conjugal love leave women vulnerable to marital rape, that the Church’s disavowal of birth control entraps women in potentially coercive relationships, and that the Church’s explicitly articulated stances on parenthood manipulatively bind women not just to the role of motherhood but to a version of motherhood that lends power and longevity to conservative Catholic ideologies.

*“I dreamed someone was raping me...”*

*Rosemary’s Baby* critiques the Catholic Church’s position on conjugal love by demonstrating how its definition of proper sexual conduct within a marriage leaves partners vulnerable to acts of marital rape. Rosemary’s betrayal by Guy, predicated by

the metaphor of alms in exchange for indulgence, is the first instance of her objectification in the film. Guy allows the Satanists to use her body, watches as Satan rapes her, and the following morning makes the galling decision to smilingly inform Rosemary that *he* raped her while she was unconscious. He of course does not use the word rape, and Rosemary cannot quite bring herself to accuse him of it. Clearly yet quietly upset at her assault (“We could’ve done it this morning or tonight, last night wasn’t the only split second...”), Rosemary murmurs that in her dream someone had raped her, but she does not accuse Guy of having done so. Neither, for that matter, would the Catholic Church have. In order to properly understand the political implications of this scene, we must undertake close reading of the then contemporary stances of the Church regarding marital rape.

Pope Paul VI, whose reign lasted from 1963 to 1978, addresses marital rape in single paragraph of *Humanae Vitae*, the Church’s reaffirmation of traditional Catholic stances on marriage and procreation. The mention of marital rape—a single sentence at the beginning of section 13—has the appearance of being rather begrudging. The section begins “Men have rightly observed that a conjugal act imposed on one’s partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes [...] is no true act of love,” a sentiment which, while appreciable, should raise some eyebrows (5). First, it is troubling that the only sentence in *Humanae* devoted to marital rape begins “Men have rightly observed.” Every other sentence in this section implicates the first person – Paul VI writing on concepts of holy origin from his own divinely sanctioned perspective. The condemnation of marital rape, however, is attributed to “men,” suggesting Paul VI’s hesitation to lend divine credence to the observation – he will only go so far as to say that

it is “rightly” made. Second, the word “reasonable,” much like in debates surrounding U.S. Fourth Amendment “reasonable suspicion” cases, is both vague and highly subjective – the kind of word that seems designed to give perpetrators wide latitude in justifying their behavior. Third and most troubling of all is that *Humanae* seems genuinely invested in providing such latitude, as the remainder of the paragraph jarringly transitions into a diatribe against sex that “impairs the capacity to transmit life” (5). By choosing not to claim a stance against marital rape as something divinely sanctioned, offering perpetrators of rape a great deal of leeway in asserting what their partner’s “wishes” were, and affirming the absolute necessity that married sex result in children, Pope Paul VI betrays a strong hesitancy to condemn any marital sex act in which even one member has the intent of producing children.

The sex act that Guy lies about having committed falls squarely within *Humanae*’s definition of, if not acceptable then *forgivable*, marital sex. He claims that he “didn’t want to miss baby night,” meaning that his intents were procreative, and the sex act fulfilled Rosemary’s “reasonable wishes” as some of her last words before passing out were “we have to make a baby.” The film subtly underscores this moment as a critique of Catholic ideals by showing Guy, a generally secular character, folding his hands in prayer before awaking Rosemary to enact his deception. Without some knowledge of the Church’s perspective on marital rape, an audience might read this moment as an instance of profound moral hypocrisy – how could a man who is literally carrying out the work of Satan pray for God’s protection? However, by understanding Catholicism’s leniency towards procreative marital sex acts, the audience realizes that God as the Catholic Church defines Him is a perfectly suitable recipient for Guy’s

prayers. Within a Catholic framework, Guy is absolved of the atrocity he claims to commit, and the audience's feelings of disgust and unease when he is not held accountable for his stated actions fuel their empathy for Rosemary and the deeply vulnerable position in which she and many other Catholic women are placed by a Church that is more interested in the children their bodies will bear than it is in those women themselves. The Satanists who enlist Guy to betray his wife so that she may give birth to the Antichrist child serve as a potent metaphor for a conservative Catholic Church that is tacitly willing to turn a blind eye to marital rape so long as the end result is more Catholic children.

Of course, it is Satan rather than Guy who rapes Rosemary in the narrative, a plot element which would seem to critique a central event that predicates many Catholic beliefs – the Lord's impregnation of Mary. The name "Rosemary" is very intentionally a thorny play on the name of the Holy Mother – the original novel's author Ira Levin having stated he was "well aware" that he was "standing the story of Mary and Jesus on its head." However, the film's consistent tendency to draw comparisons between the Satanism and Catholicism would suggest that her name serves a great purpose than a mere satanic counterpart. Rosemary's inability to consent or effectively protest during her rape is what ultimately allows her to give birth to the Antichrist—a source of great joy and new beginning for the Satanists—and the film seems to suggest that such a representation is not widely different from the Biblical event that resulted in the Christian Christ. By drawing a parallel between the idealized submission of Mary and forced submission of Rosemary, the film presents a critique of the Catholic Church as being fundamentally founded on notions of female subjugation and the exploitation of women

for their capacity to bear children. In such a schema, the film suggests, it should come as no surprise when women are objectified within the Catholic faith, as such treatment is modeled in the story of Mary.

*“I want vitamins and pills like everyone else!”*

Once we as an audience recognize the vulnerable position in which Catholic stances on conjugal sex leave women, we can begin to understand the dangerous bind women face when they are cut off from access to birth control. Because women are susceptible to sexual violation within the politics of Catholic conjugal duty—indeed such violation is romanticized and venerated in the story of the Holy Mother’s submission to God’s will—birth control constitutes an obvious first line of defense. While Rosemary, a woman willing and excited to become a mother, is textually unaffiliated with birth control, the narrative subtextually alludes to various elements of the birth control debate within Catholic communities leading up to 1968 as a means of arguing that the Church’s opposition to birth control has less to do with moral convictions about licentious non-procreative sex than it has to do with asserting control over female bodies in an era of increased reproductive autonomy.

Again, a brief survey of Catholic stances on the issue of contraception coupled with an overview on birth control use in 1960s America is necessary to provide insight into the film’s specific criticisms and interventions. Not having released a statement on contraceptive practice since the 1930 encyclical letter *Casti Connubii*, the Catholic Church had yet to issue a decree on the ethicality of modern forms of birth control (Fehring 125). Before the release of both *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Humanae Vitae*, the only



edicts the Church had officially put forth on family planning were the “indivisible unity” of married sex and procreative intent with one exception – the “rhythm method” of birth control in which couples practice abstinence during a woman’s peak fertility periods (123). Permitted on the grounds of its being “natural” and therefore God-given, the rhythm method stood in opposition to other forms of birth control that were deemed “artificial” inventions of hubristic and licentious men (Shannon 66). However, given the recent explosion of the Pill—usage of which had increased roughly five hundred percent in the five years leading up to 1968 with roughly 12.5 million American women using the Pill as their primary method of contraception—many Catholics hoped the issue would be revisited soon (Timeline). In 1966 their prayers seemed nearly answered when the papally appointed Pontifical Commission on Birth Control released a majority statement holding that “it is natural to man to use his skill in order to put under human control what is given by physical nature,” or more succinctly, that so-called artificial birth control should be considered no less natural than the rhythm method (Shannon 67). Arriving two years on the heels of the Commission’s majority report, *Rosemary’s Baby* critiques a Catholic Church that has yet to embrace the use of contraception.

The film most overtly establishes its critique on Catholic opposition to birth control by attributing an insistence on natural as opposed to artificial healthcare practice to the Satanist cult. Upon discovering she is pregnant, Rosemary is ecstatic, immediately scheduling a follow up appointment with the doctor her friends have recommended to her. Upon hearing her (but more importantly *their*) good news, Roman and Minnie insist she change doctors, telling her of their good friend, the highly acclaimed physician Abe Saperstein. Deciding to see him out of politeness, Rosemary explains to Saperstein that

“Dr. Hill prescribed me vitamin pills,” to which he replies unequivocally “No pills. Minnie Castevet has a nice herbarium. I’m going to have her make a daily drink that’ll be fresher, safer, and more vitamin rich than any pills on the market.” Time and again, various members of the coven assure Rosemary that her natural pre-natal regimen will be infinitely better for both her and her child – an assurance intended to be reminiscent of Catholic insistence on the naturalness of the rhythm method. Notoriously unreliable and deemed “detrimental to marital and family life” by the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control, the rhythm method—at least in this film’s estimation—is not endorsed by the Vatican because of how healthy it is for young families (Fehring 123). Rather, it is a means by which the Church asserts power over married couples and female bodies, condemning the use of prescriptions that would dramatically decrease Catholic birth rates in favor of a “birth control” method that all but ensures a couple will eventually wind up pregnant. The Satanist’s insistence on Rosemary’s natural vitamin drinks parallels Vatican policies on natural family planning very precisely. Just as the rhythm method is widely considered unhealthy for married couples, Rosemary’s drinks are hugely detrimental to her health, causing her to shed weight at an alarming rate and leave her in constant pain. The Satanists clearly *know* that prescriptions pills are healthier—early in the film Minnie and another Satanist discuss how “girls today [are] much healthier than we were thanks to vitamins, better medical care...”—and Pope Paul VI has clearly read the majority report issued by the Commission he himself assembled. However, the healthy option does not serve the ends of either the Satanists or the Catholics, and that end is exactly the same – maintaining ready access to women’s wombs and the insurance of future births that will promulgate the power of the Church.

In addition to critiquing the Church for disingenuously advocating unhealthy methods of family planning, *Rosemary* characterizes the Catholic stance on contraception as the totalitarian suppression of a democratically supported healthcare option. In addition to insisting that Rosemary only pursue natural methods of pre-natal care, he tells her not to “read books” on pregnancy and not to “listen to what [her] friends say” regarding their pregnancies. The Satanists want Rosemary’s only information on her pregnancy to come from them, for if she consults outside sources she will undoubtedly become suspicious of the dangerous position they have placed her in. A critical moment in which Rosemary begins to realize how unhealthy Saperstein’s medical regimen is occurs with other young women. Weary of the Castevets and their elderly friends’ constant presence in her home, Rosemary decides to throw a party for she and Guy’s young friends (“It’s going to be a very special party – You have to be under sixty to get in”), and only in the company of women her own age can she understand how alarming her situation is. The scene takes place in the kitchen, a traditionally female sphere, and the femaleness of the moment is concretely enforced when Guy tries to enter only to have another woman shut the door in his face with the non-apology “Sorry, girls only.” Distraught and sobbing, Rosemary confesses the pain she is in but assures her friends that she ought to trust Saperstein because he is a “society doctor” – a phrase that implies his elite status, his existence above more mainstream, democratic styles of practice. However, her friends will have none of it and insist that she return to Dr. Hill, explaining that common sense ought to tell her “pain is a sign that something is wrong.” This moment speaks strongly to the political climate of the moment regarding birth control – women of means were taking advantage of access to the Pill, and communicated to their

friends by word of mouth how beneficial an option it was. I do not want to overdo the observation that “Pill” and “Hill” sound very similar, but it bears noticing that the solution to Rosemary’s problems—the one thing that would cut off the Castevet’s access to her womb—would be entirely accessible if it were not for the Satanist’s verbal insistence that she not pursue said option. The Satanist’s prohibition of new and democratically supported medical information is meant as a condemnation of self-serving old Catholic men whose totalitarian opposition to modern contraception both restricts the freedom and endangers the health of young families.

One final means by which we as an audience can read the film as a critique of Catholic exploitation of female bodies is by noticing the architectural metaphor of Rosemary and the Castevet’s neighboring apartments. The film begins with Rosemary and Guy taking a tour of what will be their new apartment. As they explore, the realtor becomes suddenly perturbed at the sight of a large chest of drawers (drawers which he calls a secretary) at the end of a hallway. He explains that a full closet is behind that secretary, and he cannot imagine why the previous tenant might have put it there. The realtor and Guy proceed to move the secretary in doing so, unbeknownst to the audience, open up a secret passageway between this apartment and the Castevet’s. At two critical moments in the movie the Satanists will break into Rosemary’s apartment through this hall closet – once to bring a drugged Rosemary to the ritual impregnation in their apartment, then again to ambush her as she goes into labor and steal away with her baby before she wakes up. With these two moments in mind—the beginning and end of a pregnancy—the audience recognizes the pathway between the two apartments as decidedly vaginal imagery. Rosemary’s apartment symbolizes her womb, the place the

Satanists must gain to access to in order for their child savior to be born, and their apartment represents their world, their politics, and their political aspirations. The removal of the secretary then becomes a small nod to the importance of birth control, for had the pathway remained blocked, Rosemary's womb would never have become vulnerable to the machinations of the Satanists. This visual metaphor very explicitly reveals the film's assertion that the Catholic prohibition of birth control is a method by which the Church exploits female bodies for access to Catholic wombs.

*"Aren't you his mother?"*

In understanding the profound constraints the Catholic Church places on married women in terms of their authority over their own bodies, we can finally expose the means by which the Catholic Church ensnares women within the role of motherhood and thereby promulgates its power. At the conclusion of *Rosemary's Baby*, Rosemary passes through the closet to the Castevet's apartment and finally realizes the full terror of what has befallen her. She sees her satanic child, red-eyed and cloven hoofed, and shrieks out in terror as Roman explains that she is mother to the Antichrist. When her terror subsides however, she becomes very still, watching one of the Satanists rock her child's cradle. "You're rocking him too fast," she says quietly. Roman dismisses the other woman from the cradle and asks Rosemary to rock him. "You're trying to get me to be his mother," Rosemary says, incredulous, to which Roman responds, "Aren't you his mother?" In her article on *Rosemary's Baby* as a gothic metaphor for restrictive abortion access and pro-life politics, Karyn Valerius reads this as a moment in which the film "pursues the logic of 'pro-life' arguments against abortion to grotesque conclusions" (128). Rosemary's

baby posed a profound threat to her health in the womb, is the product of rape, and is deformed by most human standards – all three of which were the only conditions that could grant a woman access to abortion in 1968 (125). In spite of all this, Rosemary comes face to face with Roman, has him ask her to mother this creature, and chooses to do so with the last frame of the film showing the beginnings of a loving motherly gaze.

*This* is how the film argues the Catholic Church sustains its power. By stripping Rosemary of all authority over her body, the Satanists give her one thing in return – a child to mother. The film would argue that Catholicism makes palatable the removal of bodily autonomy by venerating the role of motherhood, the end result of such exploitation. Like the folk story of the tyrannical king who plucks the feathers from a shivering bird and decrees that the bird thanks him for the warmth of his hand, the Catholic Church leaves married women vulnerable to assault by their husbands, cuts them off from access to birth control, maintains control over their reproductive lives completely, but expects that women will thank them in the end when they are granted the respect owed to Catholic mothers. When Rosemary agrees to be the mother to her child, she becomes the film's disturbing symbol of the Catholic Church's ability to exploit female bodies in a way that results not in terror or outrage, but contented domestic submission.

*“This is no dream, this is really happening!”*

The first night Rosemary has dinner with the Castevens, Rosemary expresses some discomfort at the flippant manner in which Roman refers to Pope Paul VI. Noticing her unease, Roman laughingly tells her “You don't have to respect him because he pretends

that he's holy." By 1968, America had become a decidedly more secular place than it once was – much of the reason Vatican II occurred was to decide how to address this issue. As a result, a rift formed within the Church between conservative minded officials who thought reform had gone too far, and progressive individuals who thought it had not gone far enough. *Humanae Vitae* would be released three years after the conclusion of Vatican II, and would fall squarely on the side of the debate that equated progress with secularity and liberality with loss of authority. When Roman—the film's symbolic leader of the Catholic Church—asserts that no one has to respect the Pope because he claims to be holy, the filmmakers are asserting their belief that the Paul VI *knows* people have grown skeptical of Church authority and chooses to lean less on moral teachings than on policies that secure Catholic power. By imagining the worst scenario that could possibly come of these policies, *Rosemary's Baby* seeks to drive its audience away from pre-Vatican II conservatism and exploitation. Roe v. Wade, the court case that would uphold a woman's right to choose an abortion, would not occur for another five years, but this 1968 film shares much of its spirit – a veritable Roe's Mary story which critiques Catholic exploitation of female bodies and refuses to consider holy motherhood sufficient payment for women's objectification.

## CHAPTER II

### A Failed Exorcism: *The Exorcist* and Lingering Ghosts of Catholic Conservatism

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“I need a priest, a nun, and two students!” yells a crewman on the set of William Friedkin’s 1973 iconic horror film *The Exorcist*. Father Karras, the movie’s titular exorcist, stands amidst a crowd of onlookers to watch the filming of a Vietnam protest movie on the steps of Georgetown University. This brief scene contextualizes the film within its political moment – America is experiencing its first ever televised war, and the images from overseas are hardly ones of impending peace and victory. The protestor’s signs and chants—“H.E.L.P – Help Eliminate Lying Pigs,” “Military OFF Campus,” “I’ve seen enough killing in my lifetime – there’s no need for it!”—reflect a nation disillusioned with both the political establishment that entered the war and the brutality employed in its failing attempts to win. Notably, the nation’s disenchantment in this scene concerns the government and the military; two institutions that largely form the basis of contemporary masculine archetypes – the decisive political leader, and more



importantly, the virile hero soldier. With these two institutions suffering from an increasingly negative public image, something of an authority vacuum has opened within the court of public opinion. Cue the crewman's call for extras playing church officials and the scene's setting at a Jesuit university, emblematic of fact that the Catholic Church has aligned itself squarely with war detractors, Pope Paul VI having actively advocated against the war efforts on the floor of the U.N. General Assembly eight years prior. By pairing male and female Catholic officials alongside protestors and *against* two powerful nuclei of traditional American masculinity, this film within the film suggests that the modernized and civically engaged post-Vatican II Church can offer a brand of gentler, less rigidly masculine authority to counteract the ill effects American masculinity has wrought on the nation in the process of fighting a devastating war. However, the only actual priest in the scene is not actively engaged in this conversation on power and authority. When Karras leaves the production site at the staged rally's height, the film sheds light on a question significant to both the film and the 1970s American public – whether the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, with all its lingering archaic religiosity, could convince Vietnam-era Americans that its aspirations toward a more progressive and more sensitive model of authority were desirable to the nation or even in earnest on the part of the Church.

A cursory look at America's Vietnam-era political climate suggests that this question, at least with regard to the Church's progressivism and ability to wield authority, ought to have met with a resounding "Yes." In the years leading up to William Blatty's original 1971 *Exorcist* novel, the Catholic Church seemed primed to convince American audiences of its capacity for approachable, forward-thinking engagement. The previous

decade had seen the unprecedented approval rating of America's first Catholic president (Gallup), the promising conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, and the enforcement of said Council's recommitment to contemporary issues with Paul VI's public disavowal of the Vietnam War in St. Peter's Square – a disavowal which took place the very month that disapproval ratings of President Johnson's handling of the war would peak (Carroll). With this latter effort, the Church made clear its opposition to traditionally militant male authority, positioning itself as a more peaceable alternative. Blatty's novel is devoted to this modernized, pacifist image of the Catholic Church, and to some extent the film follows suit – in both works the central character of Father Karras is in many ways presented as a model of progressive yet sensitive Catholic authority – a psychiatrist first, a priest second, and an aggressive figure only in his distant past. He relates that he received his Harvard medical training not of his own accord, but at the insistence of his seminary, and when Chris, mother of the possessed Regan, initially asks Karras how he would advise a parishioner seeking exorcism, he responds "Well, the first thing I'd do is put them into a time machine and send them back to the sixteenth century." Though Karras' faith is portrayed as in tension with his secular education, the novel ultimately holds that both elements can and must exist in harmony – his secular background and gentle demeanor make him approachable to Chris, and his faith inspires his self-sacrifice that saves Regan's soul. The film, however, is indicative of an American public that has more misgivings about post-Vatican II pacifist authority model championed by progressive Catholics – misgivings evident in the adaptation's production, plotting, and reception. Before delving into how public skepticism manifests itself, we must address

said skepticism's origin – the inciting incident that for many called the compatibility of Catholic faith and pacifist authority into question.

On November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1972—a year after the release of Blatty's novel and three months after the film had started production—Pope Paul VI delivered a speech called “Confronting the Devil's Power” which, according to scholar Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, confirmed for many the “secular suspicions that the Catholic Church was entrenched in archaic folklore, rather than offering a dynamic spirituality suited to the demands of the twentieth century” (65). The speech warned of “the tangible reality of the Devil in the contemporary world” and explicated the necessity of devout faith in overcoming his power (65). Presumably for Blatty, this declaration of belief aligned perfectly with the thesis of his novel – scholar Sean Quinlan argues that Blatty “doesn't reject the modernized Church. Rather, he implies the clergy and laity simply needed to believe in it” – “it” being the reality of the Catholic conception of evil and the validity of Catholic methods in overcoming that evil (324). Such literalism (and somewhat aggressive literalism at that, albeit in a spiritual setting rather than a militaristic one) however, represented a major hurdle a Vietnam-era American viewing public. The *Exorcist* novel sets Karras up as a religiously informed tonic to the broken state of American masculinity—a figure whose heroic self-sacrifice presents an alternative to the “ideal of the American fighting hero [that was] in disrepair” following a brutal, televised war (Self 113)—but this alternative becomes decidedly less palatable when undercut by “giddy [...] superstition” that to many seemed a direct contradiction of the peaceful and progressive aspirations articulated at the Second Vatican Council (Heller-Nicholas 65). This chapter will argue that despite the Church's avowed commitment to progressivism

and rejection of more violent contemporary masculine ideals, progressive Catholic's proposed model of authority as emblemized in the *Exorcist* novel failed to resonate with audiences because the conservative actions of the real world Catholic Church undercut his insistence that the Church had fully inhabited a post-Vatican II ethos of authentically peaceful authority. Through an analysis of the production, plotting, and reception of the 1973 adaptation *The Exorcist*, this chapter will explore how the Church's proposed model of sensitive authority was at its heart a patriarchal construct by another name, how American audiences did not seem particularly interested in the post-Vatican II vision of pacifist authority, and how the real life Church was content to capitalize on the more aggressive image of the Catholic faith depicted in the film.

*"You probably know as much about possession as most priests."*

In order to understand how the *Exorcist* adaptation undermined Catholic promises of pacifist progressivism in the wake of Vatican II by exposing the more accurate lived values of the Church, we must first examine the positive representation of the Church that informs the controversial film. The *Exorcist* novel tells the story of the twelve year old Regan, daughter of single mother and actress Chris MacNeil, who becomes possessed by a malevolent demon—possibly Satan—and eventually requires the aid of Jesuit priest and psychiatrist Father Karras to rid her of the affliction. The novel legitimizes the post-Vatican II Church's avowed commitment to a more peaceful model of Catholic authority by portraying the Church as both modernized and approachable – a new Church for a post-sixties America ravaged by the effects of militant masculinity. In creating this modern, approachable image of the Church that would be in line with espoused post-

Vatican II ideals, Blatty depicts Catholicism as first and foremost accepting of modern secular authorities. The result of his efforts is what scholar Sean M. Quinlan (whose essay “Demonizing the Sixties: Possession Stories and the Crisis of Religious and Medical Authority in Post-Sixties American Popular Culture” will largely define this essay’s use of Blatty’s novel) refers to as a “Catholic apologia” – an acknowledgment of the Church’s conservative past combined with assurances of how much internal change has occurred since Vatican II (321). Quinlan observes how thoroughly the novel depicts the Church as having become attuned to secular methods of problem solving, employing “striking medical realism” when describing various physicians’ approaches to diagnosing Regan (323), and writing Father Karras as supporting said physicians’ continued efforts on the grounds that the Church now understands “mental illness, about paranoia; split personality” (Blatty 236). In depicting Karras as dedicated if not preferential towards secular authorities, the novel emphasizes that the Catholic Church’s professed embrace of modernity is a change for the better, so long as that embrace is accompanied by continued faith in Catholicism itself as authoritative. This dual engagement with both traditional religion and contemporary science, Quinlan argues, represents what progressive Catholics saw as the solution to the problem of how the Church could “regain its dignity and authority in post-sixties society” – a regaining that is essential to the post-Vatican II quest for Catholicism to be seen as not only accessible but *necessary* (324). Ultimately the novel asserts that “only a faithful clergy [...] could cure social disorder and restore harmony” – a conviction which predicates the model of Catholic authority embodied in the heroic figure of Father Karras (Quinlan 325). A symbol of hope for progressive Catholics, the Father Karras of Blatty’s novel represented the possibility for the Church

to retain its traditions and model a more sensitive brand of male authority better suited to the Vietnam era if only the American public could see the Church's efforts at secular engagement as credible.

The Catholic Church's ability to position itself as a credible, approachable source of authority is key to the post-Vatican II ethos and subsequently the novel, for the aspirations of progressive Catholics were not merely cosmetic – they were systemic. The 1971 *Exorcist* reveals a progressive Catholic desire to supplant toxic Vietnam-era masculinity with a masculinity informed by Christian devotion. In her essay on religious fanaticism in the early American Republic, Elizabeth Barnes delineates a model of Christian masculinity that caught hold in a time of economic upheaval in the early nation – one that bares striking resemblance to the ideal that the *Exorcist* novel offers up to a nation whose notions of manhood had been ravaged in the wake of the Vietnam War. Barnes writes that “at a time of particular crisis in the history of American masculinity” it became evident that “Christian paradigms [could] invigorate 'sensitive' male characteristics—relationality, submissiveness, loving protectiveness—with masculine potency” (Barnes 173). Such an overhaul of contemporary American masculinity is precisely what the novel advocates for through the character trajectory of Father Karras. Before the novel's climactic exorcism, Karras, a former virulent young boxer, is emblematic of the damaged state of American manhood. Vietnam historian Robert O. Self argues that “the war, and the debates that raged around it, transformed the American soldier from a heroic and competent figure into a deeply ambiguous one — especially following the revelations of the 1968 My Lai massacre and other atrocities” (Ireland). The novel uses Karras to argue the progressive Catholic conviction that an embrace of

faithful Christian manhood was crucial means by which men could restore their heroism and competence without reliance on militant standards of masculinity. Karras' character scrupulously adheres to Barnes' model when he finally succumbs to his faith and performs Regan's exorcism. His relationality in his interactions with Chris, submissiveness in his relationship to God, and loving protectiveness of Regan coalesce into a Christological act of heroism – a salvific self-sacrifice that rids the world of great evil with no dependence on the harsher, more virile masculine traits that had so recently become marred alongside the reputation of the American soldier. The novel's two-pronged path to this restorative masculine heroism—religious devotion married with a commitment to modern, secular authorities—forms the basis for the thesis of Catholics who supported the changes made during Vatican II: that the modernized but enduringly faithful Catholic Church has lived up to what it resolved during the Second Vatican Council and is now posed to offer a standard by which American masculinity can and must be remodeled to undo the evil wrought by war and post-sixties social unrest.

Of course, from a gender perspective, it bears noting that this sensitive model of Catholic authority that Vatican II supporters rallied around in the figure of Father Karras is unquestionably a male authority model. Though this model is positioned against hegemonic male authority of the American 70s, patriarchy in sensitive sheep's clothing is nonetheless patriarchal. Father Karras, despite being reformed from his aggressive youth as a boxer, a man who loves his mother, appreciates science, and ultimately expresses the ever-feminized trait of submission to God in the novel's climax, is nevertheless set up as a male savior to the problem of an absence of male authority. Regan's distress over her absentee father not calling on her birthday is the genesis of her unrest that eventually

gives way to her possession, and her single mother Chris, while depicted as a caring, strong-willed career woman and provider, is ultimately unable to provide the help her daughter needs without male assistance. As renowned horror scholar Carol Clover observes, females such as Regan tend to be “possessed when crucial men are absent [...], and [...] are retrieved only by the intervention of men” (103). This representation of Catholic authority as being decidedly male is hardly specific to Blatty’s novel. Many felt that Vatican II deeply failed women by refusing to endorse the use of birth control, and to this day the Church does not endorse women’s ability to enter into ministry. While this does not make the efforts of progressive Catholics at a more sensitive brand of male authority insignificant or unappreciable, it certainly curtails any revolutionary aspects of their agenda. And if the progressive Catholic agenda laid out in Blatty’s novel is somewhat underwhelming, it is nothing compared to the deconstructed vision of Catholicism depicted in the film. While most of the major plot points remain the same and Father Karras’ characterization survives largely intact, the final product is indicative of a viewing public that perceives the Catholic Church as being far removed from the progressive and necessary institution that Vatican II supporters purported it to be. With an understanding of how the somewhat lackluster progressive Catholic desires were made manifest in the novel, we can see how each aspect of their vision was subverted within the film by skeptics who were less than receptive to their vision of the Church – how the production team tasked with a high degree of realism created an atmosphere of arcane literalism that spoke to a very conservative religiosity, how the plotting diminished the heroism of Father Karras and Catholic masculinity, and how the film’s reception revinced a viewing public and a larger Catholic contingent that were entirely comfortable with a



form of Catholic authority that bore closer resemblance to hegemonic Vietnam era masculine authority than post Vatican II pacifist masculinity.

*“My bed was shaking. I can’t go to sleep.”*

The production of the 1973 adaptation *The Exorcist* lives in infamy as an instance in which the horror seen on screen is the direct result of actual terror inflicted upon the actors by a director whose profound commitment to a vérité style of filming led to a finished product that speaks more to a Catholic Church “giddy” on its own superstition than to the progressive Church reflected in Blatty’s original novel (Heller-Nicholas 65). William Friedkin’s penchant for realism was precisely what made Blatty select him for the project – he had just received an Oscar for “[elevating] realism to new heights” in *The French Connection*, and Blatty wanted “to make a ‘real’ version of an exorcism he had read about while a student at Georgetown” (McDannell 200). However, Blatty soon found himself looking on as Friedkin fired guns to keep his actors on edge, re-aimed Regan’s pea soup projector to hit Jason Miller’s face rather than his chest, slapped actor William O’Malley in the face to ensure he looked adequately devastated at the death of Father Karras, rigged Regan’s thirteen year old actress Linda Blair to contraptions that elicited screams of real pain during her convulsion scenes, and allowed Chris’s actress Ellen Burstyn to injure her back for a scene in which Chris is thrown violently across a room (201). The production was originally intended to take three months but, due to setbacks, was stretched out to a grueling eight, and the hardship shows on the faces of the actors (201). Ironically, the scenes of possession and death that caused the actors the most pain are not even the film’s most terrifying – Friedkin’s unflinching gaze during the

hospital scenes in which doctors invasively attempt to discern Regan's ailment are some of the most upsetting medical renderings this side of staged battlefield amputations. In terms of realizing true horror on screen, Blatty and progressive Catholics who supported his vision for of Church received more than they could have hoped for – and in all truth, more than they did hope for. From the first day of the film's release, Blatty “was not happy” with the film Friedkin had made, and was very vocal about their disagreements (199). Most upsetting to the novel's rendering of a progressive Catholic Church were the plot changes made within the film—changes which will be discussed at length later in the chapter—which masked the novel's depiction of an efficacious clergy in favor of sensationalist imagery that ratcheted up the literalism that progressive Catholics of the era were eager to be apologists for.

In the *Exorcist* adaptation, enacting realism did not merely mean depicting the actual as visceral and the fantastical as startlingly possible – it meant stepping away from religious themes that could mar the production in one of the greatest possible enemies to the *vérité* style – commercialism. Friedkin felt very strongly that some of Blatty's scenes that expounded upon Catholic faith and even occasionally Catholic optimism would cripple his production style, rendering a cast of authentically terrified actors in an organically terrifying movie mere artificial mouthpieces for the Church performing a what he dubbed a “theological commercial” (200). Friedkin adamantly defended his choice to honor the production style by skirting around a more moralizing plot, arguing that “there was nothing wrong with each viewer arriving at his or her own conclusion” concerning the meaning of the film (199). Friedkin's impulses were largely justified by the fiscal success of the film – audiences believed in the honesty of a film about Catholic

literalism, believed in the reality of a conservative Catholic Church more concerned with arcane religiosity than progressive aspirations toward a new model of secularly informed sensitive male authority. Blatty's choice to hire a director who could realistically bring his vision to the screen backfired because in the end, progressive Catholics did not want a realistic movie so much as they wanted a *convincing* movie. Obviously Vatican II supporters wanted audiences to see Catholic clergy operating comfortably as members of a largely secular society, wanted to show that Catholics regard science and medicine with just as much respect, if not more, that they pay to their traditions, but ultimately they wanted a film that would convince audiences that Catholicism had progressed enough since Vatican II to become viable and necessary pillars of authority, and for Friedkin (and by extension, American audiences that attended his film in droves) that level of moralism—even-handed as Blatty may have intended it—was unacceptable and moreover, less realistic given the image the larger Church was building for itself during the production stages of the film. As referenced earlier, the Pope Paul VI was making speeches on the “tangible reality” of the Devil in the modern world and the necessity of confronting that reality through faith (Heller-Nicholas 65). Granted, that news came much to the chagrin of many Catholics who felt misrepresented by Paul VI's words, but the fact remains that in the very moment that Blatty was attempting to orchestrate a wide release film to convince audiences that progressive Catholics only acknowledge the evils of their tradition begrudgingly if at all, the leader of the Church was undercutting his message in the most trenchant manner possible. The progressive Catholic model of sensitive male authority—a model that would be immensely undersold in the film's

theatrical cut—was widely distant from the brand of masculinity that higher ups in the Church itself sought to encourage.

*“I think the point is to make us despair... to make us reject the possibility that God could love us.”*

As a result of the director’s commitment to a vérité production style, a number of scenes from Blatty’s original *Exorcist* screenplay were cut from the film in a way that severely undermined the themes of Catholic masculinity that in large part defined the plotting of source text. The progressive Catholic belief that a new brand of masculinity was desperately needed in the wake of the Vietnam War is realized in the original screenplay over the course of three scenes that do not appear in the 1973 film, but were released in a director’s cut (the “Version You’ve Never Seen” edition) in 2000. All occur near the film’s end – one in which Father Karras and the older, wizened Father Merrin prepare to re-enter Regan’s room to perform the final exorcism, one in which Karras’ friend Father Dyer visits Chris and Regan after Karras’ self-sacrifice, and one that was originally intended to conclude the film in which Father Dyer and Detective Kinderman, a man investigating a death that occurs early in the film, link arms in an act of budding friendship. Notably, all three scenes involve Catholic priests and all three, given their proximity to the film’s climax, occur at critical junctures in the narrative and are meant to inform the audience’s reaction to the pivotal exorcism scene. Through a close reading of the scenes and how their absence impacts a reading of the original 1973 cut, it becomes apparent that the director correctly decided that calling the heroism of Karras’ sacrifice into question would play better to American audiences than Blatty’s original screenplay –

a screenplay which spoke to Vatican II supporters' desire for Catholic heroism to be not only self-evident, but endorsed and celebrated.

The cut scene in which Father Karras and Father Merrin, a seasoned, scholarly priest with previous experience in exorcism, prepare for Regan's exorcism is perhaps the most thematically significant of the three, as it heavily evokes the idea that the Catholic religion is absolutely imperative in facing not only the evil possessing Regan, but in a broader sense all inane evils that cause people to lose hope. Karras and Merrin have just left Regan's bedroom. At this point in the film she is fully possessed by the demon, her behavior so violent as to merit constraints that bind her to the bed, her face infamously malformed and spewing green vomit between bursts of obscene profanations. Sitting on the stairs, slump shouldered and devastated by what he has just witnessed, Karras asks Merrin or perhaps just the quiet air around him "Why her? Why this girl?" to which Merrin responds "I think the point is to make us despair. To see ourselves as animal and ugly. To make us reject the possibility that God could love us." In this moment—the specific moment Friedkin referred to as a "theological commercial"—Merrin puts a definitive Catholic spin on the entire exorcism scene. Saving Regan is elevated from a specific battle against an isolated evil to an event that has the capacity to restore humanity to God's unquestionable love in a time of doubt and despair. As such, when Father Karras finally compels the demon to enter him before throwing himself from Regan's window, his sacrifice is elevated to an act of more universal implication – through devotion to God, individuals can fight for everyone, not merely for themselves.

This scene constructs a decidedly potent metaphor for the restorative power of faith in the hands of broken men. Because Blatty's novel frames Karras as a parallel to

the American soldier—a former fighter whose strength has not given him the power to protect his family (Karras’ mother dies on his watch early in the film)—this act offers an alternative brand of salvific masculinity specifically to Vietnam-era audiences. Obviously literal bodily sacrifice is not called for in reality as it is in this scene, but certainly a sacrifice of self in the act of loving, protective, spiritual devotion. However, without this scene, Karras’ sacrifice is not only lessened – its implications are muddled. Did he sacrifice himself? Or “didn’t the devil kill him” (McDannell 199)? Audience’s reactions to this scene will be discussed at length later in the chapter, but suffice to say that when the stakes set up in this deleted scene are no longer present, the impulse to read his sacrifice as such becomes far less compelling, thereby partially deconstructing Blatty’s attempts to model a new Catholic masculinity and heroism in the film.

The second scene the film deletes to the detriment of progressive Catholic desire to put forth an alternative approach to masculinity is less critical thematically than the first, but more important in the sense that it models how post-Vatican II ideology could have swayed American audiences. Parts of this scene form the theatrical edition’s conclusion, but the sections that are left out create a wholly different effect. In the theatrical cut’s final scene, Father Dyer, Karras’ longstanding friend and fellow progressive priest, has recently seen Karras’ broken body at the foot of the stairs outside Regan’s window, and has come to visit Chris and Regan a final time to see if his friend’s death served any purpose. He sees Regan, restored to her full and normal self, and she, recognizing the significance of his white collar, embraces him and jovially kisses his cheek. Had the first cut scene appeared in the film, this would function more strongly as the second half of the religious commercial Friedkin so adamantly avoided – the former

scene functioning as some happy cross salesmen peddling through the streets handing out rosaries, and the latter as a smiling child saying “Gee, thanks mister!” However, even without the explicitly salvific implications of the first scene present, the takeaway from this moment is clear – Regan is to some degree changed by her experience, literally embracing a male representative of the Catholic Church in gratitude and thereby underscoring the heroism of Karras’ final act. However, the bit that follows this exchange decidedly undercuts Regan’s moment of appreciation. In the theatrical release, Chris and Regan have tossed their bags into the cab that will take them back to Los Angeles and away from the site of their trauma, but Chris asks the driver to stop the car. Through the window, she gives Dyer a medallion she found in Regan’s room – Karras’ medallion which she possessed Regan snatched from him during their final struggle. He accepts the medallion and watches as they drive away while the film’s menacing score begins to play and the screen fades to black. This ending is easier argued as pessimistic than ambiguous, as Chris’s return of the medallion implies that while she may be grateful for Karras’ intervention, she remains unpersuaded by the Catholic faith – she would rather wash her hands of the whole affair than keep a token of the man who sacrificed himself to end it. Conversely, this moment could be read as her figurative passing of the torch on to Father Dyer should evil reappear, thus potentially insinuating her burgeoning faith and the ongoing necessity of a faithful clergy. But again, the menacing score which accompanies the scene combined with the open ended portrayal of Karras’s possibly-sacrifice possibly-murder is certainly not the hopeful championing of Catholic masculinity that Vatican II supporters might have hoped for. However, in the 2000 edition, the scene is restored to its original length. Chris offers Dyer the medallion, but he insists that she

should keep it. After a meaningful look, Chris withdraws her hand and drives away with her token of Karras' act in tow. This scene in the extended cut fully executes Blatty's original aspirations for the film. Chris clearly has not converted, but she is swayed by Karras' act of heroism and will carry with her a religious medallion reminding her of the faith that saved her and Regan from a living nightmare. In effect, the film held the potential to function as the audience's medallion – a reminder that through faith, anyone (but more textually, any man) can act as a savior to others without reliance on brute strength or imposed dominance. Without this section of the scene, the theatrical cut implies that the audience is absolved in whatever they choose for themselves – to take the intended progressive Catholic message, or in Chris's case, to leave it.

The final scene removed is somewhat odd, and different scholars have taken different approaches to its meaning with regards to the effect Blatty intended for his audience. In the scene, Father Dyer is walking away from Chris and Regan's now vacated home when he is approached on the street by Detective Kinderman, a man who has been investigating the death of another man who "fell" from Regan's window early in the film. An ongoing element of Kinderman's characterization is his love of film and his desire to find a person who will accompany him to the theatre since his wife has lost interest in their movie dates. He and Father Dyer exchange words about the oddities of the MacNeil home before Kinderman invites Dyer to see *Wuthering Heights* – a film Dyer professes to have already seen. Regardless, the two decide to have lunch, linking arms as Kinderman paraphrases a line from another famously romantic film, *Casablanca*, claiming that he suspects this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. This represents a curious example of rather feminized male bonding – two men linking arms to become movie buddies



whose taste is for films nothing like *The Exorcist* or genres of the action variety, but rather for more classical, romantic fare. The scene is suggestive of the more sensitive brand of masculinity championed by progressive Catholics who supported of Pope that advocated against war and for a more peaceful shade of leadership than that displayed in the orchestration of the Vietnam War. Here we see the “progressive” aspirations of Vatican II supporters to challenge traditional American male authority, but in a way that decidedly preserves patriarchal control. Inocuous though the moment may be, Kinderman’s complaint that his wife decided to stop accompanying him to the theatre after he took her to see *Othello* of all things, is indicative of how little space is made for women in even the most progressive of Catholic works. The removal of the scene deprives the theatrical release of a depiction of progressive Catholics’ capacity to champion sensitive male authority, but to the feminist reader the scene is no great loss as its inclusion would have resulted in no less marginalization of women than the unfinished product. In effect, the progressive Catholic attempt to show how modern, how reformed, how sensitive its patriarchs have become functions as little more than a red herring to those who might hope a post-Vatican II world might be more authentically progressive with regard to women.

Although the removal of these three scenes certainly downplays a post-Vatican II model of Catholic masculinity in the final product, the loss of their thematic potency does not seem particularly relevant given the wider reality of the Catholic Church in 1973. In his address “Confronting The Devil’s Power,” the language Pope Paul VI uses is hardly that of Blatty’s masculinity model – a model that elevates, in Elizabeth Barnes’ words, “‘sensitive’ male characteristics—relationality, submissiveness, loving protectiveness”

(52). Rather, he claims that “the Christian must be militant, he must be vigilant and strong” (Paul VI). Despite having come out against the Vietnam War and war as a whole, Paul VI still frames his speech on masculinity and confronting evil in the language of war – the language of the very brand of militant masculinity that Blatty claims the Church can provide an alternative to. Ultimately, both Blatty’s original screenplay and Friedkin’s more conservative theatrical cut outpace the real life 1973 Catholic Church in terms of progressivism – a fact that wider audiences seemed altogether unconcerned with upon the film’s release.

*“Since the day I joined the Jesuits, I’ve never met a priest  
who has performed an exorcism.”*

Details of *The Exorcist*’s reception upon its release provide ample evidence that not only the American viewing public but also the Catholic Church itself was more than happy to view Catholicism in a traditionally pre-Vatican II light. Before exploring how the Church responded to the film, it is necessary to examine how *The Exorcist* was read by general audiences. Fiscally, the film was an enormous success – a 2012 Business Insider article ranked it as the third best performing horror film of all time, grossing 232.9 million dollars (Austin), in spite of Friedkin’s 2012 assertion that, according to MPAA rating standards, “in today’s world there would not be enough Xs in the alphabet for *The Exorcist*” (Huddleston). In addition to being wildly popular, the movie boasts in-theatre audience responses that rival the infamy of the film itself. Theatre owners reported viewers vomiting, fainting, and crying hysterically in the aisles (McDannell 202), and more troublingly, several murders and suicides were recorded as occurring in direct response to the film – some reporting that they themselves had become possessed

upon watching the movie, including one man who claimed his possession led him to murder a nine year old girl, and another performing an all-night exorcism upon himself in his local church before going home to kill his wife (202). While these isolated, more extreme cases cannot speak to the nation's reaction to the film as a whole, the more commonplace responses of genuine terror speak to how well Friedkin accomplished his goal of creating a film about Satan and possession that felt *real*. Of course, along with that triumph of realism came the undoing of several elements of the more progressively minded screenplay, and with it, the hopes of many Vatican II supporters. Without the scene that occurs prior to Regan's exorcism between Father Merrin and Father Karras, the film sets up no true adversary for the powers of Satan – Merrin and Karras are men of God, but Merrin dies midway through the exorcism and Karras never explicitly reaffirms his faith in the text of the film. The Merrin and Karras scene was meant to elevate the men from the level of isolated individuals to powerful figures wielding the strength of a great Catholic promise – the promise to confirm “the possibility that God could love us.” In a theatrical cut without this moment, it is no wonder that many audience members – members who had just seen Merrin die and were uncertain as to the state of Karras' heretofore broken faith – perceived Karras' death not as his sacrifice, but as his murder at the hands of an ultimate evil. Colleen McDannell notes the prevalence of this reading (“didn't the devil kill him?”) in her essay collection *Catholics in the Movies* (199), but a particularly telling example of how easy a misread this became comes from Carol Clover's critical study *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, in which she summarizes the scene by stating that Karras “falls to his death through the [...] upper-story window—presumably by the force of the devil's entry” (69). The fact that Clover, a scholar whose

legacy in horror criticism is built on the careful observation of film, could misread this moment speaks to how utterly themes of progressive Catholic heroism failed to transfer to the film. However, the droves of American viewers who saw the film would suggest that most were unperturbed by this ending and moreover by a depiction of a thoroughly literalistic Catholic Church. In essence, without Blatty's optimistic ending and scenes that reinforced Karras' heroism, the film became not about the triumph of the post Vatican II model of sensitive masculinity, but about the necessity of a more archaic, pre-Vatican II kind of faith that the "murdered" Karras lacked.

Fortunately for audiences who embraced this more archaic vision of Catholicism, various representatives of the Catholic Church were more than willing to accept their representation in the film. Despite urging from critics of the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* for Catholics not to be "willing to see their faith turned into a horror show," there was no mass denouncement of the film from prominent Church figureheads (McDannell 203). In fact, in response to such provocations by critics who expressed discomfort with such an arcane depiction, Jesuit professor Robert Boyle and film critic of the national Catholic magazine issued a joint statement that their faith "does include the elements of which horror shows are made – human evil, fear, pain, superhuman evil and malice, and retribution," and adding that secular critics' discomfort with the film likely came from the fact that it "posited the existence of otherworldly diabolical evil" – an existence they themselves did not reject (Boyle). Such voices combined with Pope Paul VI's address "Confronting the Devil's Power" reveal that even if Vatican II supporters' efforts at depicting a more secular-minded, progressive, sensitive Catholic Church in the *Exorcist* adaptation had succeeded, they would have been no match for the state of the

real life Church. Rather than hiding their belief in supernatural evils in the closet as Karras does, many Catholics were proud to put that belief on display – to say they were actively confronting the Devil’s power through, in Paul VI’s phrasing, “militant” faith that undermined not only progressive Catholic efforts at moving away from literalism, but also their efforts at moving toward a standard of post-Vatican II masculinity that evaded the militancy of the Vietnam era.

*“What an excellent day for an exorcism.”*

When Father Karras walks away from the staged Vietnam protest on the steps of Georgetown University, *The Exorcist* asks the question of whether or not the 1973 Catholic Church was truly in earnest about its desire and ability to model a more sensitive brand of authority for a Vietnam-era American public. It would seem—from a production style that honed in on the realism of a Catholic Church committed to a pre-Vatican II brand of masculinity, from the film’s own plotting which diminishes the already lackluster progressive Catholic stance the heroism of sensitive male authority, and from the overwhelmingly positive reception at the depiction of a literalistic, almost militantly masculine Catholic Church—that *The Exorcist*’s text and cultural presence indicate that many simply did not care. Neither the film’s general audience, nor representatives of the Church, nor even the progressive Catholic author of *Exorcist*’s source text insisted that the Church be depicted as the post-Vatican II establishment it had once set out to be with regard to the empowerment or even thoughtful consideration of women. The vision William Blatty had for the Church – one of a modernized clergy operating with secular acumen in the contemporary world while retaining its traditions in a quiet but reverent

way, of Catholics modeling a more peaceful archetype of masculinity for a nation that needed a new course – ultimately proved not to be what general audiences wanted from the Catholic Church. Rather, audiences were content to accept that Friedkin's film spoke truthfully with regard to the Church's priorities, and Paul VI and various other Catholic figureheads were happy to emulate that truth. Blatty's novel and screenplay signified the attempts of progressive Vatican II supporters at exorcism – an exorcism to remove from Catholicism the lingering ghosts of pre-Vatican II conservatism and outdated gender politics that led mainstream America down the path of a terrible war. However, given that they intended to replace this patriarchal demon with none other than another model of Catholic male authority, it is perhaps just as well that critics look upon their failure not so much as a loss, but as a subtle horror story about even the most progressive of Catholics' possession at the hands of patriarchy.

### CHAPTER III

#### The End of an Era and The Beginning of a New Age: The Legacy of *The Amityville Horror*

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“Diaboloical forces are formidable. These forces are eternal, and they exist today. The fairy tale is true. The devil exists. God exists. And for us, as people, our very destiny hinges upon which one we elect to follow.” These words appear on screen in the final moments before credits roll on the 2013 horror film *The Conjuring*, a movie that provides a fictionalized account of real life demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren, whose reports on a haunting they encountered in 1971 inspired the 1979 film *The Amityville Horror*. The most surprising elements of *The Conjuring* have little to do with things what go bump in the night – rather, the film sidesteps expectations of modern horror movies by its heavy implementation of the oft shied away from “God” word. Ed and Lorraine’s story arc revolves around their conviction that “God brought [them] together for a reason,” Ed shames Roger Perron (the man whose family has taken up residence on demonic soil) for not baptizing his children, and Roger’s wife Carolyn is ultimately able to overcome possession in a scene that is modeled to look more like a Christian laying on of hands than a traditional bound-to-the-chair movie exorcism scene. The film’s earnest and

unironic evocation of religious language and imagery is in large part why critics heralded *The Conjuring* as a throwback to “the 1970s [...] golden age of horror cinema” (Dargis) – a sentiment that Warner Bros. marketed the movie on, inviting “Catholic priests to hand out holy water at advanced screenings” (Dowd). More compelling still is how the film couples its unabashed religiosity with a strong undercurrent of female empowerment. Yes, the character who falls prey to possession is a woman, but she is redeemed not through the help of her husband or a male religious authority – in fact, both of those characters are sidelined in the film’s final act. Rather, she is saved by the power of her own will and the aid of the female demonologist, Lorraine, as the two channel the feminine characteristic of maternal love into authentic and effective power. As such, an ironic conundrum underpins the fact that critics drew a connection between *Conjuring* and 70s horror cinema based on their shared themes of that old time religion, for religious film of the 70s was predicated largely on tropes of female victimization and occasionally their salvation at the hands of men. Understandably, the film of that era with which *The Conjuring* shares the most in common is *The Amityville Horror* – the film which in many ways initiated a clean break between Hollywood and its love affair with religious horror cinema and, by extension, a subgenre that allotted its heroines very little ability to combat the horrors that befell them.

The 1979 film *The Amityville Horror* concerns the evils infesting to home of George and Kathy Lutz, a newly married couple with three children from Kathy’s previous marriage. *Amityville* is unique to the canon of 1960s and 70s religiously inflected horror films in that the evil in the film derives from not one but two malevolent forces, one being more traditionally satanic in nature, stemming from the fact that Salem



witch John Ketchum had previously lived on the land, and the other being a more nebulously occult evil – the spirits of an Indian burial ground<sup>1</sup> on which the proverbial haunted house is built. To combat these dual evils, the film sets up two corresponding protagonists. The Satanic infestation falls classically to a Catholic priest named Father Delaney, who is invited by the religious Kathy to bless her new home early in the film. The mystery of the burial ground, however, is designated to George Lutz and more interestingly the character of Carolyn, the wife of one of George's close friends. While George has no choice but to confront the spirits that permeate his home and slowly bring him under their possession, Carolyn actively chooses to confront the mysterious spirits, as her self-proclaimed sensitivity to occult energy draws her to the house. Strangely, both evils in the film are not actually defeated – while George and Carolyn are able to unravel the mystery of the Native American burial ground, Father Delaney is laid utterly low by the satanic presence that pervades the Lutz's home, ultimately going blind and losing his faith in the face of a malevolent force he cannot overcome. Though the *Amityville* filmmakers could not have foreseen the consequences of their decision to fork the film's plot in these two directions, their choice to do so in many ways signified in the end of Hollywood's Catholic horror golden age with Father Delaney's loss of faith, and the beginning of a new brand of horror that shifted focus away from satanic evil towards the secular paranormal. As this chapter will explore through an examination of the film's dual narratives and its legacy with regard to the films that followed in its footsteps, *The Amityville Horror* in large part pioneers this transition into paranormal horror for the

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<sup>1</sup>Obviously there is nothing "occult" about Native American burial grounds, but this is the attitude this film very explicitly and problematically takes. Darryl Catherine's article "Heirs Through Fear: Indian Curses, Accursed Indian Lands, and White Christian Sovereignty in America" explores this topic in more depth.

agency that the new genre was able to afford female characters – agency which had proven inaccessible within a Catholic framework.

### *The End of an Era*

*Amityville*'s contradictory depiction of Father Delaney—a “modernist who thought Vatican II didn't go far enough” yet is simultaneously convinced of the devil's presence at the Lutz's home despite the disapproval of his *more* conservative colleagues—unveils some of the reasons why Hollywood and audiences began gravitating away from Catholic horror plots with the onset of the 1980s. The year preceding *Amityville*'s release, Pope John Paul II succeeded the overseer of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI, and along with his election came an “increasingly conservative” papal era that, among other things, allowed several bishops to appoint official exorcists within their dioceses (McDannell 202-3). While several of the structural changes implemented during Vatican II remained in place—mass being given in the common tongue, priests facing their congregations rather than sermonizing toward the cross—John Paul II's election to the papacy indicated that the Church's efforts at cultural change to the end of a more engaged and progressive public presence had been decidedly sidelined. As such, Father Delaney's treatment at the hands of his more powerful, more conservative peers can be read as signifying an end to the post-Vatican II spirit that made Catholicism a compelling and dynamic subject for film in the first place. Films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* were animated by their commentaries on the successes and failures of the Church in living up to the goals it set for itself during Vatican II, and audiences were motivated to see them by the topical nature of the Church

in the wake of great internal change. *The Amityville Horror*, while certainly participating in the tradition of these films, seems only to have one commentary – that the dynamism which once invigorated Catholic horror cinema was dead. Father Delaney is rendered impotent in the film from the moment his character is introduced. Delaney comes to the home to perform a routine blessing at Kathy's behest, but the Satanic forces permeating the home cause him to come down with a terrible illness the second he passes over the Lutz's threshold. This illness follows him from the home, spreading beyond his body to contaminate even his church. An icon of the Holy Mother crumbles before his eyes and plummets down from the church rafters – a moment which marks his final renunciation of faith. The final image of Father Delaney in the film—a scene that occurs directly before the climax to the parallel plotline concerning the Native burial ground—finds him in the Church courtyard, cloaked in black, robbed of his sight by the satanic force that plagues him, and catatonic to the efforts of a fellow priest attempting to restore his faith. In hindsight, his dress is more fitting than the filmmakers could have known – a funereal ensemble marking the end of Catholicism's hay day in Hollywood.

Before exploring the parallel plotline of George and Carolyn, a preliminary exploration of why the film so resolutely disavows the Catholic plot arc is in order. After all, Delaney's plot line is not even allowed to reach a real conclusion. In any other Catholic horror film of this era, a satanic infestation coupled with a Catholic priest would immediately alert the audience that Chekov's exorcism would soon be afoot. Not only does Delaney not defeat the satanic presence – he is not even given the opportunity to do so. Rather, his conservative colleagues and his own vulnerability to evil spirits render him utterly incapable of action. In effect, his dangling thread of a plot arc signifies one of

the many reasons that Catholic horror plots would shortly fall out of vogue. With Vatican II increasingly losing relevance and the Church itself leaving behind promises of cultural change that made Vatican II so compelling in the first place, Catholic horror narratives could no longer sustain the archetype of the progressive hero priest, let alone afford agency to characters who existed outside the narrowly defined Catholic power hierarchy. Anxieties the public had held about the machinations of the Church in the wake of Vatican II—whether the Church would catalyze religious authority figures to positions of political prominence, whether it would use its revolutionary claims to do good or ill by women and less traditionally masculine men—were dissolved by the Church’s cultural shift back to an essentially pre-Vatican II normativity. There was no longer any anxiety to be worked out in film in part because the liberal Catholic hope of Vatican II had by 1979 begun to die. As Father Delaney, progressive Catholic proponent of Vatican II, literally loses his sight and faith, so had the Catholic Church lost its vision of empowering more marginalized members of its community, thereby snuffing out the flame that fueled cultural hope and fears that made Catholic horror cinema of the 60s and 70s so compelling.

### *The Dawn of a “New Age”*

With the death of one horror subgenre came the new life of another – the paranormal subgenre, one of the earliest of which was modeled in the plot of the Native American burial ground in *The Amityville Horror*. The burial ground is referred to with language decidedly indicative of the dawn of 1970s New Age pseudo-science – a brand of supernaturalism that undergirds many of the films that follow in *Amityville*’s footsteps.

The most significant development accompanying the birth of the paranormal genre was the expansion of possibility for female empowerment in horror film. Whereas the explicitly Catholic horror films of the 1960s and 70s confined women to the roles of mother, daughter, and victim, the burgeoning paranormal genre instituted the trope of women as being naturally more inclined to supernatural energies than their male counterparts. Carolyn, an early sketch of this character type, attempts to explain the paranormal logic of the home's spiritual infestation to both George and her husband, arguing in rather eye roll inducing New Age-y language that, because "energy cannot be created or destroyed – It can only change forms," the negative energy which once existed on George's land has been "changed" into the form of evil spirits. It is notable, however, the extent to which the film acknowledges the cringe worthiness of Carolyn's diction and the way in which the script subverts audience reactions to her specific brand of self-empowerment. When Carolyn initially and quite correctly surmises what could be plaguing the Lutz's home, her husband balks at her assertions, telling her that she sounds kooky – a sentiment the audience is presumed to share. However, her husband moves quickly from this milder policing of her language to a more overtly aggressive and paternalistic form of criticism, yelling for her to "shut up" in a public establishment in front of perfect strangers. In this moment, the audience's impulse to write off Carolyn's feminized New Age logic is implicitly criticized as being short sighted and, more cuttingly, rather misogynistic – especially given the fact that Carolyn is completely correct. Because of her innate sensitivity to energies, Carolyn is the first person in the film to discover the location of the Indian burial ground in George's home – the "vibes"

coming from the house “pull” her, and she cannot help but taking an axe to the wall of George’s basement to unveil the heart of darkness from which these occult forces spring.

Similarly revolutionary is the power of her action, both physically with regard to her breaking down the wall, and mentally given the acuity with which she uncovers the nucleus of the horrors that women in these types of films so often fall victim to.

Compared to the actions of other non-antagonist women in Catholic horror films – Rosemary going so far as to hold a knife to potentially defend herself from her Satanist neighbors before being lulled back into their clutches, Regan lacking any bodily autonomy for well over half of *The Exorcist*, Chris placing her daughter’s fate in the hands of more capable men, and the mother of *The Omen* going from being knocked over the stair rail by a child to being pushed out of a hospital window by her child’s nanny—Carolyn’s degree of agency is rather astonishing, especially given the fact that she survives the movie entirely unscathed. It is no wonder *Amityville* felt the need to create a subgenre of horror that was unconnected to Catholicism – in a Catholic schema where only male Church authorities have the capacity for agency, characters like Carolyn simply do not exist unless they are explicitly evil.

Although the pseudo-science of New Age has not aged well, modern audiences have much to gain by analyzing the origins of this brand of horror movie logic in terms of what made it so appealing upon its entrance into mainstream cinema and in how its trajectory throughout film history has established more sophisticated conventions. For *Amityville*’s purposes, New Age and the paranormal are set up in direct contrast to the explicitly religious, as Catholic brands of evil had a tradition in Hollywood of being the kind of evil that only men could fight. Father Karras fights off the demon in *The Exorcist*,

Gregory Peck grapples with the demonic Damien in a scene which alludes to another male-centric religious story of Abraham and Issac in *The Omen*, and Rosemary meanwhile is left to be impregnated by the devil in *Rosemary's Baby* – male power and female victimization was absolute par for that genre's course. In an effort to afford a female character some degree of power, the writers of *Amityville* seem to have felt they had to create a whole new subcategory of the supernatural – a fact that speaks to how poor a job the Church did of relating to women in new and dynamic ways in the years following Vatican II. In penning *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI revealed that he still saw women as little more than mothers of Catholic infants and daughters who would later become mothers of Catholic infants. With such a structure in place, it can hardly come as a surprise that women had little space to be included in Catholic horror films as anything other than victims and passive players. As the 70s gave way to the 80s and the women's movement attained continued cultural relevance in a way that Catholic Church did not after its return to conservatism with Pope John Paul II, audiences thirsted for a wider array of roles for women in horror that allowed them to operate outside patriarchal spheres. As such, movies like *Amityville* innovated not so much out of political or feminist motivations as out of a need to play on current events that would compel viewers into seats. *Amityville's* answer to the marketability of more diversified female roles was to create a brand of supernatural evil—secular paranormal evil—that existed outside of what its Catholic horror predecessors had more or less established as religious evils that could only be fought by men.

The legacy of *Amityville Horror's* institution of the paranormal subgenre is easily traced through the concurrent character types of the New Age woman and the

professional parapsychologist. The New Age woman is a trope original in horror subgenres to *Amityville* as typified in the character of Carolyn – a woman with no particular training or expertise in the occult who is nonetheless naturally attune to secular paranormal energies. Steven Spielberg’s 1982 megahit *Poltergeist* is one of the first films to follow in *Amityville*’s footsteps by using the New Age woman trope and pursuing occult evils rather than religious evils. Certain lines iterated in *Poltergeist* by Dianne Freeling, the mother of the family that is terrorized by the titular poltergeist, are clearly drawn from the sketch of the New Age woman that *Amityville* had achieved with Carolyn three years prior. When Dianne experiences initial oddities around the house—seemingly innocuous experiences like furniture rearranging itself—she is unperturbed, stating to her husband that these occurrences are nothing to worry about – merely “another side of nature – a side that you and I are not qualified to understand.” This moment is directly reminiscent of Carolyn admonishing her husband to not “be such a hardcore rationalist. You know, everything in life cannot be explained by a slide-rule.” The anti-rational, pro-intuition part of the New Age woman trope is certainly to some extent playing on retrograde depictions of women as intuitive but irrational, but it is significant that the women in these early incarnations of the paranormal horror are using abilities that are characterized as uniquely feminine to attain power in their relationships with their husbands. Not only do *Amityville* and *Poltergeist* cement the idea that women are empowered by their closeness to the paranormal – their intuition for the occult allows them the ability to navigate situations of wonder and danger in ways their husbands cannot. This is significant, because the Catholic horror movies that preceded *Amityville* suggested not only that a woman’s exposure to demonic forces would only do her harm,



but that she literally could not survive without the aid of a *man* of God. *Amityville* and *Poltergeist* initiated a reactionary legacy in which women were uniquely capable of confronting supernatural forces without harm, and in doing so, afforded more varied character representation and thus wider audience marketability than Catholic horror films of the previous decade.

In exploring further avenues for the representation of women bearing agency in this burgeoning paranormal subgenre, *Poltergeist* creates a variation on *Amityville*'s New Age woman character type – that being the now pervasive horror trope of the professional parapsychologist. Equally pseudo-scientific in nature, the parapsychologist character is very similar to the New Age woman, but with the added dimension of having trained to approach and interpret the supernatural – of having authority. In essence, if the paranormal horror subgenre began as a woman-friendly subversion of the Catholic horror genre, the New Age woman operates with as much agency as a lay Catholic man, and the parapsychologist with as much agency as a Catholic priest. *Poltergeist* establishes this trope in the characters of Dr. Lesh, the female leader of a team of parapsychologists that come to investigate disturbances in the Freeling home, and Tangina, a famously gifted clairvoyant whose name serves as a rather on the nose pun about just how wrapped up this character type was in femininity at its inception. Although this trope becomes less gendered in the years following *Poltergeist*, it is important to observe how drastically the creation of the parapsychologist as a stock character revolutionized supernatural horror films. Until very recently, it was exceedingly rare to see a priest perform an exorcism or assist a couple concerned about a potential haunting – more often than not, fiscally successful movies implemented parapsychologists, demonologist, or some other brand of

pseudo-scientific expert – a fact which speaks to the Church’s profound loss of relevance in the predominantly secular sphere of entertainment after the election of Pope John Paul II – a loss of relevance which, as films like *Amityville* and *Poltergeist* suggest, was largely tied up in the Church’s failure to more meaningfully make space for women in the wake of Vatican II.

### *Paranormal Trajectory*

The conventions which largely defined the paranormal horror subgenre at its inception—conventions like the New Age woman and the professional parapsychologist—have left a clear legacy, the echoes of which resonate in the horror cinema of the present day. The genre would go through a parodic era for the remainder of the 80s with films like *Ghostbusters*, in which the paranormal being Zuul is associated with the female element because women have an energy that is more compatible with Zuul’s androgynous power than men. In its silly way, *Ghostbusters* subverts horror conventions of films like *The Exorcist*, because Sigourney Weaver’s possession at the hands of Zuul occurs not because of her feminine weakness or vulnerability, but because this powerful entity shares some degree of connectivity to her femininity. *More* recently, the genre has gained success with the *Paranormal* series, and residue of the New Age woman trope is decidedly visible throughout the films – most specifically in *Paranormal Activity 3*, in which it is revealed that the demon which has haunted the central figure of Katie since her youth is in fact in alliance with her and her family. It is explained that Katie’s grandmother belonged to a coven of women who, through their unique connection to the occult, use their power to do ill against men who threaten to undermine

their matriarchal lineage. Even *The Conjuring*, a film that on its surface bares so much resemblance to the Catholic horror films that were made before *Amityville*, relies more heavily on the character types constructed in the secular paranormal subgenre than the Catholic horror subgenre. This is why *The Conjuring* is able to draw inspiration for empowered female characters from a part of 70s horror tradition. A gifted clairvoyant who is highly sensitive to demonic energies, the character of Lorraine Warren is modeled more on Carolyn from *Amityville* and the led parapsychologists from *Poltergeist* than any woman from more exclusively Catholic horror films – her being Catholic is more a cosmetic choice on the part of the filmmakers to have the film more closely resemble a product of Hollywood’s horror golden age. In a sense, the Catholic horror subgenre and the paranormal horror subgenre meet for the first time since 1979 in the character of Lorraine Warren – a hopeful indicator that the modern Catholic Church has perhaps progressed far enough that a female character being both Catholic and personally empowered within the traditionally male sphere of holy power can seem plausible in audience’s eyes.

### *A New Hope*

Despite being a wildly popular film in its day, the legacy of *The Amityville Horror* provides many reasons as to why Catholic horror narratives had lost relevance and box office power by the end of the 1970s. As the scene of progressive Catholic Father Delaney’s loss of faith suggests, the Church had moved on from the promises of cultural change that made films with Catholic narratives both topical and critically salient in the late 60s and early 70s. Those assurances that Catholic progressivism had been

sidelined signified to the filmmakers that it was time to seek out progressive representations of people less privileged by the Church through different narrative avenues. The popularity of the New Age woman and parapsychologist tropes that *Amityville* helped to establish reveal precisely what female characters and real life women could not attain in a Catholic schema – empowerment, autonomy, and authority. With any luck, films like *The Conjuring* may indicate that Catholicism has changed enough in recent years to convince audiences of its narrative potency once again – to convince audiences that the devil exists, that God exists, and that both men *and* women’s very destinies hinges upon which one they elect to follow.

## CONCLUSION

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As we come upon fifty years of living in a post-Vatican II world, we must ask ourselves whether anything has changed since Rosemary was forced to have her baby. Since William Blatty attempted to argue for a more peaceful brand of Christian masculinity, only to have his audiences interpret Father Karras's sacrifice as the murder of a man who lacked the militant masculinity Pope Paul VI encouraged. Since *The Amityville Horror* realized that in order to empower women within a Catholic framework, it had to break open that framework and add something entirely different. People happily share the news that the newly elected Pope Francis says dogs can go to heaven, but shrug it off when reminded that he does not believe women should become ordained. To be critical of media is to be critical of the real world truths that media reflects, and if it is the case that movies like *The Conjuring* indicate that Catholicism is becoming a compelling source for mainstream horror cinema again, we would do well to look to the movies of the past and ask whether we still have to confront the same fears – and if the answer is yes, perhaps we have not been critical enough.

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